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# Limits of Narrative : Introduction

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# Introduction: Limits of Narrative

Samuli Björninen and Merja Polvinen

There are those who say that our chances of surviving the climate crisis hinge on our choice of narratives: on whether we are telling the right stories about it, on whether we can change the prevailing cultural and ideological "narratives" around it. Towards this end, the British newspaper *The Guardian* started programmatically commissioning investigative pieces about climate change in 2015. One journalist suggests a possible direction for future climate stories: "This is not about polar bears. This is about real effects on human beings, we're talking about food scarcity, water scarcity."[1] Choosing to print stories about both humans and nonhumans, as well as about complex phenomena such as water scarcity, has the immediate effect of informing the reading audience about different sides of the multifarious issue, but this is perhaps only a partial solution to the conundrum of climate crisis and narrative. Alan Rusbridger, *The Guardian*'s erstwhile editor-in-chief, points out that writing narrative journalism about the climate crisis is difficult for at least two reasons: the colossal scope of the problem and its lack of day-to-day change. Rusbridger puts his finger on an important aspect of climate writing. Even if we take it that narrative is a form conducive to communicating problems and change on a human scale, what are its chances of communicating the planetary, rather than human, scope and pace of climate change, and for being a successful vehicle for climate writing?

Indeed, there are also those who would argue that rather than being part of the solution, narrative is more likely to be part of the problem. Narrative forms have particular affordances that make them amenable to some uses and ill-suited to others. The multifaceted crisis facing the natural world ranks high among the reasons why, perhaps more than ever before, narrative scholars are invested in inquiring about the outer limits of narrative. It is also a topic that many of the contributions to this special issue tackle in one way or another.

[1] https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/mar/12/find-a-new-way-to-tell-the-story-how-the-guardian-launched-its-climate-change-campaign

Further topics covered here are equally challenging: how successful narrative is in grasping the ever-more complicated processes of scientific discovery and digitalisation, as well as the futures they offer for humanity; and how narrative forms affect the various (ethical, embodied) ways in which we are human, both in relation to each other and to the nonhuman world.

Before setting off to these frontier territories, however, we want to root the questions asked in this special issue squarely in narrative theory, and explore how narrative comes to be considered a possible solution to such problems in the first place. In this introduction to the special issue we therefore take a brief look at the background to the challenges narrative and narrative theory currently face. Our focus will first be on how the idea of the limits of narrative has appeared in narratology, and on the ways that theory has developed to identify and realign those limits. In the second half we introduce the articles included in this special issue and the phenomena they examine – phenomena which challenge the representational capacities of narrative in a multitude of ways, and which may also lead narrative theory to re-examine its own aims and the possible limits of its practice.

**From the Narrative Turn to the Storytelling Boom**

Roland Barthes' famous introduction to the study of narrative structure from 1966 cast narrative as a ubiquitous cultural form: "Like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural" (237). Since Barthes' essay is now perceived as one of the starting points to the "narrative turn" within academia, it has also been subject to reappraisals. For one, it is no longer clear that the assumptions of transhistoricity and cross-cultural omnipresence of narrative are warranted. However, more than half a century after Barthes, it can be said that at least in the capitalist West, societies are living in an age of a veritable storytelling boom (Salmon 2010; Mäkelä et al. 2021), even if we should not take for granted that the Barthes of 1966 would recognize it as such. For Barthes, narrative was evident in a host of representational practices:

> Among the vehicles of narrative are articulated language, whether oral or written, pictures, still or moving, gestures, and an ordered mixture of all those substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, drame [suspense drama], comedy, pantomime, paintings (in Santa Ursula by Carpaccio, for instance), stained-glass windows, movies, local news, conversation. (Barthes 1966, 237)

Today, most of us would consider this an even-keeled and conservative, albeit contestable, inventory of narrative genres, media and forms. As expansive as Barthes' scope of narrative may have been in its time, the range of things inscribed in our cultural imagination as narrative has, in fact, outgrown it.

Over the past few decades, storytelling has become one of the megatrends of Western culture. Propelled by the advent of the Internet, as well as the success of consultancy entrepreneurship and self-help culture in the neoliberalist marketplace, storytelling has become a centerpiece of communication in various areas of life ranging from journalism to politics, and from identity work to marketing. At the same time, emerging and in-vogue scientific disciplines from evolutionary biology to neuroscience have managed to popularize their views of narrative as a prime purveyor of empathy and other forms of interpersonal understanding (see Mikkonen 2021, 1–3). This has been somewhat baffling even to contemporary narrative scholars who, while undoubtedly confident that what they study is of a great general relevance, perhaps still could not see this wave coming. Christian Salmon puts this bafflement in words in his polemic study *Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind*:

> How could Roland Barthes' idea that narrative is one of the great categories of knowledge that we use to understand and organize the world come to dominate political subculture, management methods, and advertising? What are we to think of the new vulgate that tells us that all discourses – political, ideological, or cultural – should adopt a narrative form? (Salmon 2017, 9)

When we compare this to Barthes' 1966 list of the vehicles of narrative, we see that Salmon's articulation of the question already hints at the answer: narrative is thought of less in terms of representational artefacts and more in terms of understanding and organizing experience. This shift is emblematic of "the broadening range of reference" that characterizes the understanding of narrative after the so-called "narrative turn" (Hyvärinen 2006, 21). Increasingly, the category of narrative is seen to span beyond the stories we tell by particular means and through particular media to the human processes of understanding both the world and our experience of it.

The redefinition of narrative as a basic form of human cognition has had a lasting effect on the study of narrative. While this position is especially pronounced among the first-wave cognitive narrative scholars, it also more broadly informs the contemporary adoption of narrative as a key term in many fields. According to H. Porter Abbott, narrative is "the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time" (2008, 3). David Herman writes that narrative spans "both an abstract cognitive structure and the material trace

left in writing [...] or some other representational medium" (2003, 170). In what is often called the "postclassical" phase of narratology (see Alber and Fludernik 2010), theorists and scholars are learning to live with the broadened view of narrative as a mental structure as well as the resulting view of it as a category of representations that have the power to rearrange the materials of life to a meaningful whole. In his recent study, Kent Puckett (2016) contextualizes this broadened view of narrative within several historical frames in the western intellectual history from Aristotle to structuralism – via Hegel, Marx, and Freud. Such readjustments have been extremely beneficial to narrative studies, establishing that the discipline deals with issues that are central to the study of history, identity, and social formations. At the same time, they also give narratology pause by suggesting that many of the earlier movements understood their scope too narrowly.

However, in an age that valorizes storytelling and posits, sometimes carelessly, that all sorts of social, political and interpersonal practices can be seen as *narrative* practices, it is sobering to remember that narrative has been predominantly studied as a bounded phenomenon. Even though Barthes' rhetoric was assimilated into the parlance of multidisciplinary narrative studies, the field would not go on to declare itself the science of everything. Rather, the variance of ideas about the scope and aims of study has sedimented into a layer of self-reflexive or metatheoretical discourses that undergird cross-disciplinary exchange. That we inevitably approach narrative within certain boundaries, whether they be conceptual, disciplinary, or pragmatic, is an idea that has sustained itself throughout the expansion and diversification of narrative studies.

## Narrative and Its Neighbors

Approaching narrative by tracing its boundaries may be an endeavor as old as studying narrative (Prince 2003, 4). In another key text from 1966, Barthes's American contemporaries Robert Scholes and Robert Kellog define narrative and its neighbors thus:

> A lyric [...] is a direct presentation, in which a single actor, the poet or his surrogate, sings, or muses, or speaks for us to hear or overhear. Add a second speaker, as Robert Frost does in "The Death of the Hired Med," and we move toward drama. Let the speaker begin to tell of an event, as Frost does in "The Vanishing Red," and we move toward narrative. For writing to be narrative no more and no less than a teller and a tale are required. (Scholes and Kellog 1966, 4)

Scholes and Kellog build on a tradition of literary theory that places narrative adjacent to other major genres of occidental verbal arts: lyric and drama. Countless literary scholars have followed suit. Even when they have opted for different analytical categories, the practice of defining narrative differentially has been the predominant one. However, since narrative scholars do not share a uniform theoretical background, they also draw the boundaries of the phenomenon differently. Thus, scholars who define narrative as a discourse type rather than a genre do so in relation to neighboring discourses, such as descriptive, analytical, and lyrical (White 2010); or in contrast to other discursive "macrogenres," such as argumentation, instruction, conversation, and reflection (Fludernik 2000). Further, once narrative is seen to break its discursive boundaries and take up a position as a way of making sense of the world, as it does in cognitive narratology, further differential definitions appear. Here narrative is defined in relation to other instruments of mind, including representational systems such as mathematics, graphs and simulations, and the embodied sensory system that forms the basis of all human experience (Herman 2013).

Published back to back with Barthes' essay (again, in 1966), Gèrard Genette's "Frontierès de récit,"[2] marks an alternative path for the differential approach and serves as a precursor to more pragmatic approaches. After all, one can only arrive at the limits of narrative by actually looking into narrative texts – no matter how by-one's-own-bootstraps this practice may seem from a strictly theoretical viewpoint. In doing just this, Genette discovers that the "frontiers" of narrative cannot be reduced simply to the outer boundaries distinguishing one class of texts from others. There is a push against the boundaries of narrative within narrative texts themselves, as they constantly shift between the narrative and descriptive modes and conjure up discursive voices in one place and make them disappear in another.

After the narrative turn, storytelling has increasingly been understood as something basic and natural to humanity, but Genette belongs to a tradition that foregrounds the strangeness and complexity of narrative (Puckett 2016, 8). This tradition can be traced back to the Russian Formalists, whose attention frequently drifts from narrative commonalities to particular defamiliarizing artistic devices. These two drives of naturalization and

[2] Genette's essay has been translated both as "Boundaries of Narrative" (by Anne Levonas in *New Literary History* in 1976) and as "Frontiers of Narrative" (by Alan Sheridan for the collection *Figures of Literary Discourse* in 1982). The suitability of both terms emphasizes how Genette's pragmatic approach holds within it both the idea of narrative as a bounded genre and as a form only traceable by the ever-moving action of reading.

defamiliarization thus draw another set of differing limits to what narratives are, what they do, and how they should be studied.

## Limits of Narrative Theory

Gerald Prince writes that the scope and limits of narrative theory necessarily depend on our definition of narrative (2003, 1). Yet since defining narrative is itself part of the praxis of narrative theory – at times a more central part than at other times – it might be justifiably said that the limits of narrative theory are not simply determined by our understanding of narrative. Instead, that very understanding as well as the scope of narrative theory are continually negotiated within the field. But what is at stake in these negotiations? Taken together, one thing that all the differential approaches to defining narrative show is that the theoretical framework affects which aspects of the phenomenon under study become foregrounded. Moreover, a change of narrative theory changes not just how we see narrative itself as an object of study. We also gain another view on its embeddedness in its social and worldly context, and may end up drawing the boundaries of narrative differently, as well as defining the nature of its relationships to various non-narratives differently. We have already seen one such perspectival shift in contrasting Barthes's bounded view of narrative – however varied its representational vehicles – to the vastly expanded sense in which some contemporary narrative scholars understand the range of narrative phenomena.

It should come as no surprise, that in step with the expansion of narrative, narrative theory itself has become less the unified endeavor that structuralists and their followers in narratology envisioned, while becoming more and more a site of debates about its own history and reach. While early narrative theory modelled itself as a falsifiable and self-correcting science (e.g. Hrushovski 1976), more recently it has been accepted that historical and genealogical inquiries within the field itself have a place in narrative theory (e. g. Hale 1998; Kindt and Müller 2006; Meretoja 2014). Liesbeth Korthals Altes (2014) labels as "metahermeneutic" those approaches that probe "normative or prototypical conceptions of narrative and interpretation [...] with their historical and culture-specific dimensions" (96). Exemplifying this strain of recent theorizing, Puckett (2016) views several key instances of critical theory as being, in a particular conceptual aspect, narrative theories. They are narrative theories, that is, insofar as they bring forth questions about the relation between story and discourse, or "the relation between life and the forms that life takes when we attempt to represent it from one or another point of view" (Puckett 2016, 94). If we take – as

many have done – the distinction between story as discourse as the conceptual tool that defines narrative theory, it might also appear that the widespread problematisation of the relation between life and its representations in modern thought makes everyone a narratologist.

In choosing the story-discourse distinction as a starting point for narrative theory, however, Puckett is less interested in expanding the remit of narrative theory than in pointing out how developments of narrative theory tend to happen when our understanding of narrative itself is troubled. Arguably, both the storytelling boom and the difficulties narrative has encountered in grasping complex phenomena such as climate change, digitalisation or transgenerational trauma put us yet again in such a situation. The resurgent interest in the origins of the story-discourse distinction and other concepts of the Russian Formalists could therefore be seen as another attempt at realigning both narrative and its study. The aim of the Russian Formalists in creating the story-discourse distinction was to separate both literature and the methods suitable to its study from other cultural and psychological phenomena, but at the same time the resistance to habituation was presented as giving art instrumental value (Puckett 2016, 190-191, 204). *Fabula* and *syuzhet* formed the cornerstones of structuralist narratology, and turned the focus of scholarship on discourse as the shaping and crafting of the events of the story. Throughout its classical phase, informed by Russian Formalism, Neo-Aristotelian theorists in Chicago and Tel-Aviv, and structuralism, narratology would largely limit itself to studying the textual and technical possibilities of narrative. Classical narratology can be seen as part of the systematic study of poetics (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 141), a field routinely if perhaps untenably defined through its disassociation from "thematics" and hermeneutics (Björninen 2018, 39–43, 102–110).

In addition to the focus on form, Russian Formalism also emphasized defamiliarization as the effect of form. For Viktor Shklovsky, famously, "art exists in order to restore the sensation of life," and the "device" by which art achieves its effects is "the 'enstrangement' [sic] of things and the complication of the form" ([1919] 2015, 162).[3] All forms of art, narrative included, are set to resist those forms of everyday perception and thought that aim for ease, quickness or "economy of intellectual energy" (ibid., 157). In this, narrative belongs first and foremost to the sphere of artfulness, and its structures and functions are defined separately from other forms of human communication. Thus, while narrative as a structure may be defined by its adherence to the story/discourse distinction, it

[3] In the 2015 translation by Alexandra Berlina.

draws its power from embedding that structure in practices of thought and perception, in living human life "through the making of a thing" (ibid., 162). This idea has informed many subsequent debates in narrative theory, for example that between natural and unnatural narratology (see e.g. Alber and Richardson 2020). While the experiential immediacy and the constructedness of narrative have sometimes been framed in that debate as incommensurable opposites (e.g. in discussions about metalepsis; Wolf 2013), they can also be seen to combine in the peculiar, literary dynamic of perceiving worlds through the making of them (Mäkelä and Polvinen 2018). In our current historical context, where both the storytelling boom and the intractability of real-life phenomena are forcing narrative theory to re-examine its conceptual structures, the strange dynamic of Shklovsky's "device" draws attention once more to the capacity of narrative theory to deal with the strange as well as the familiar.

Therefore, if each definition of narrative draws the borders of the phenomenon differently, by focusing on the limits of narrative we can be more aware of, firstly, where those various edges of narrative match and create agreements between different narrative theories. Secondly, we can trace what narrative is thought to border on, and what kinds of dynamics are thought to exist between narrative and its various others. Furthermore, we can examine how far different theories define the extent of narrative's capacity for representation, and the consequences such pragmatic limits set to the development of the narrative form itself. If the narrative form, by (any) definition, is of limited use, what happens to form when literary works push against those limits? And finally, the consequences of the different frameworks can also be seen when we examine the dynamics of use: both the use of narratives, and the dynamics of the use of the theories themselves, since the presuppositions of a theory also prescribe certain limits to its application. If each of the definitions sets different limits to narrative, what instrumental roles can narrative acquire within those limits? The disagreements about defining narrative may thus be taken as a sign of narrative theory's investment in its own limits as well as those of narrative. An upside to this is that we may, should we be willing to look critically into our own practice, end up with a certain forthrightness about the implications of our theory.

## The Instrumental Narrative

In the early attempts to circumscribe narrative there exist both a vehement drive toward differentiation and another toward discovering the core of narrative – finding the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be narrative, or the set of properties that

characterizes all narratives and only narratives. However, in real life, which we spend embedded in narrative practices and interacting with forms and technologies of storytelling, the question of the limits of narrative tends to arise more pragmatically – as they do for Genette when he gets to reading narrative fiction. In life, narratives do not simply occur: wherever we encounter them, chances are somebody is using them to some ends. While the task of defining narrative remains part of the practice of narrative theory, we now are willing to entertain an alternative order of priorities. If narrative is defined, as James Phelan has it in his rhetorical narratology, as "somebody telling somebody else, *on some occasion*, and *for some purposes*, that something happened to someone or something" (e.g. Phelan and Rabinowitz 2012, 3, emphasis added), the question of the limits then becomes a question about the kinds of uses narrative lends itself to – about the kinds of work we can expect it to do.

Such pragmatic considerations have been central to the multidisciplinary developments in and around narrative. Whereas the search for hard and fast definitions and clearly delineated objects of study has a tendency to polarize, looking into the spectrum of uses of narratives in arts, politics, education, care, and identity work rather tends to affirm that there is a range of socially significant phenomena that warrants our shared aspirations towards a field of narrative studies – even if the boundaries of narrative may be drawn in several different ways.

Such considerations are in the background of this special issue and the research cooperation on which it draws. The consortium *Instrumental Narratives: The Limits of Storytelling and New Story-Critical Narrative Theory* (Academy of Finland 2018-2022) brings together three separate projects at the universities of Tampere, Turku and Helsinki, each with a specific angle on the instrumentality of narrative, and each with a slightly different view on where and how that instrumentality butts against narrative's limits. Our approaches thus share a critical interest both in the possibilities afforded and limits imposed by narrative.

The Tampere team, led by Dr. Maria Mäkelä, examines the contemporary storytelling boom across media and various spheres of life, with a particular focus on the affordances of the narrative form (Mäkelä et al. 2021). The Turku team, led by Professor Hanna Meretoja, charts the possibilities of narrative practices in constructing life stories and identities, and examines how contemporary fiction can reveal the limitations of our current narrative models and therefore does *metanarrative* work (Meretoja 2018). The Helsinki Team, led by Dr. Merja Polvinen, focuses on the challenges posed to narrative by the dynamic between the

experience of a human individual and complex global phenomena. All three teams are invested in seeking out the ways in which possibilities for action are opened up and occluded through the use of narrative. This special issue of *Partial Answers* is part of our joint undertaking to explore and articulate the limits that the narrative form and the varying narrative models impose on our imagination and on our avenues of action.

**Contents of This Special Issue**

The contributors to this special issue can be seen to address themselves to three aspects of narrative's liminality: ontological, instrumental, and formal. From an ontological perspective, the limits of narrative can be perceived, on the one hand, in the concepts of narrative within different traditions, and on the other, in the kinds of phenomena that resist being narrated. While this introduction has drawn attention to the different limits drawn by the various traditions within narrative theory, contributors have turned their focus on narrative-resistant phenomena such as large-scale evolutionary development, nonhuman embodiment and technological systems. Turning to the instrumental aspect reveals, on the one hand, limits set on human cognition by narrative practices, and, on the other hand, the limited ability of narratives to influence our ways of perceiving reality. Focus on the instrumentality of narratology and narrative theory is similarly revealing of the usefulness of our theories when they are applied e.g. in the context of fictional or non-fictional texts. Finally, formal analyses presented here uncover ways that texts leverage the potential of formal elements such as character, limited focalization, omniscient narration or narrative temporality. The articles present the specific strategies and dynamics that different forms of narratives use to represent the unrepresentable, as well as those formal qualities of narrative that still resist narratological probing.

The seven original articles included here see narrative both fall short of its expected utility and reach beyond its known limits. They inquire what happens at the limits of narrative understanding as well as, indeed, at the limits of narrative theory. The articles analyse narrative phenomena in written fiction and non-fiction that butt against temporal, material and cognitive limits of narrative in multiple directions: against graphic presentation, digital networks, non-human life and the physical environment.

The issue opens with two articles that discuss the use of narrative in science communication. In his contribution, Juha Raipola focuses on some of the consequences that arise from popular science writing being so dependent on narrative. One of these

consequences is the interbreeding of natural science and historiography, which results in forms of grand narrative that were originally shaped in evolutionary epics and works of natural philosophy being adopted in the genre of ”Big History”, or narratives of the deep history of the human species. Raipola studies two examples of the genre: Yuval Noah Harari’s *Sapiens* (2014, first published in Hebrew in 2011) and Elizabeth Kolbert’s *The Sixth Extinction* (2014), and shows how these two books negotiate the border between historiography (a genre focusing on the written record of the human past), and the much larger scale of human development and impact on Earth. Raipola asks what kinds of concepts of narrative these works are operating with, and what follows to their own narrative ethics from those definitions. Harari, Raipola suggests, opts for a teleological view of human development presented by an anonymous and authoritative voice, and for a narrative that presents the human species as a protagonist with whom the reader is asked to identify. Kolbert, on the other hand, chooses to structure her narrative on fluctuating and provisional perspectives. This guides readers towards experiencing both the material agency of individual human beings and the fact that our collective agency lacks conscious control, and thus offers readers a sense of what it means to be a member of a powerfully – even if often unintentionally – destructive species. The limit of narrative explored here is its capacity for representing temporal development and collective agencies on a scale that goes far beyond the individual. The instrumental use of narrative in science communication is shown to be prone to misrepresentation that arises, on the one hand, from narrative forms that are dominant at the time that the text is written, and on the other hand, from the form of narrative cognition itself, which can restrict our ability to think, write and read about things that do not follow familiar patterns.

Daniel Aureliano Newman’s article also acknowledges how important narratives have become in science communication, and notes how their use should be accompanied with an understanding of the meanings lost when complex scientific phenomena are narrativized. Newman’s central focus lies not in criticizing scientists, but in learning from their attempts to tackle the unnarratable characteristics of the phenomena they study. To show how such negotiations appear, Newman discusses developmental diagrams presented in narratives of evolution, in particular those depicting the development of flowers and pollinators. The co-evolution of these species is depicted sometimes in a mimetic fashion, which all-too-easily implies that the story is about the development of an individual flower or an individual fly. But sometimes, Newman shows, the diagrams are instead crafted to emphasise the artificiality of the images and to convey the (more accurate) sense that the development

happens to statistical averages, not to individuals. The example provided by such diagrams prompts Newman to argue that what is at stake is, in fact, the narrative concept of character and the ways in which our understanding of action and agency are weaved into narratives through character. By foregrounding the synthetic aspect of their characters (see Phelan 1989), the scientists attempt to de-naturalize their own representations, and thus to guide their audience away from overly mimetic interpretation of the diagrams and the resulting mistaken narrative of evolution as the story of individual development.

The third article, "Strange Tools and Dark Materials" by Essi Varis, turns our attention from nonfiction narratives to the instrumental role fictional narratives can play in enabling speculative thought. Varis first offers a theoretical discussion about the current concepts of "speculation" and "imagination" as they are understood in the second-generation of cognitive sciences on the one hand, and in the study of speculative fiction – science fiction, fantasy, and horror – on the other. These thoughts are then illustrated by an analysis of Philip Pullman's best-selling fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials* (1995–2000) and the three magical instruments that drive the plot in each of the three novels. Varis's focus, however, is not on the instruments as plot devices, but specifically on the forms of speculation and imagination that they afford. The objects function as tools for manipulating the fictional environment, and as analogies for speculative thought in the larger sense: for the capacity to see multiple possibilities for action (what Keats termed the "negative capability"), and the ability to choose and act upon the most suitable option. In Varis's argument, Pullman's use of the magical instruments his narratives itself becomes a tool for readers' speculative cognition. Following Alva Noë (2015), she argues that all artworks, fictional narratives included, are instruments for investigating our own processes of being human. Thus Varis is most interested in the ways in which fictional narratives (speculative fictions in particular) can change their readers' affordance spaces and thus enable new forms of such investigations. That is, the limits discussed here are not so much the limits of what can be represented in a narrative or how it should be done, but instead the limits in our everyday thinking that narratives can help transcend by breaking the patterns of thought we normally follow.

In her article on "Readerly Choreographies and More-than-Human Figures" Kaisa Kortekallio also aims to study the ways in which fiction can change its readers' affordance spaces. And like Raipola and Newman, Kortekallio also tackles the idea of character, but does so within the context of fictional, rather than nonfiction narrative. Working with Paolo Bacigalupi's science-fiction short story "The People of Sand and Slag" (2008), Kortekallio sets out to explore the limits of our embodied experiences during reading. While narrative

theory has mostly focused on bodily feelings as a phenomenon that exists between readers and human-like fictional characters, Kortekallio is more interested in *kinetics*, the bodily sensing of nonhuman matter and artificial form. Drawing from research in both feminist and posthuman theory, as well as the work on enactive cognition by Noë, Kortekallio suggests that fictional narratives engage their readers in enacting – sometimes consciously, sometimes not – particular experiential and affective patterns. These patterns she calls "readerly choreographies." Like Newman with the example of unnaturalized evolutionary diagrams, Kortekallio uses the example text by Bacigalupi to bring out the way that generic conventions can be used to highlight the artifice of the narrative at hand, and so engage readers more fully in reflecting on, and perhaps changing, the affective patterns they often repeat without such conscious engagement. In Bacigalupi's case, the story estranges some of the generic patterns of science-fiction adventure (excitement, action, identification with heroic protagonist), and it also turns the embodied affective attention of its readers on the nonhuman elements of the narrative. This allows Kortekallio to make one further theoretical turn and elect the term "figure" instead of "character," in order to emphasise the step she takes away from anthropocentric and anthropomorphic conceptions of narrative forms.

The focus on science fiction continues in Hanna-Riikka Roine and Esko Suoranta's article. Roine and Suoranta present a three-pronged argument concerning the limitations of narratives to represent environmentality – particularly the complex digital and social environments generated by the contemporary world. Environmental systems are usually difficult to think of in narrative terms, as their central qualities – distributed networks, nonconscious agency (e.g. of digital code) and processes happening on scales inaccessible the individual human – are not easily represented by narrative. Focusing on philosophies of technology and of cognition (for example by Erich Hörl and Katherine N. Hayles), Roine and Suoranta show how the environmental effects of digital technologies are represented in two works of contemporary speculative fiction, Ann Leckie's 2013 novel *Ancillary Justice* and Annalee Newitz's *Autonomous* from 2017. The focus is on how these works attempt to represent environmental systems by streching the representational capacities of literary form. This the novels do by literalizing three characteristics of narrative: omnicient narration, character-focalization and the mind-reading of fictional characters. Such literalization of representational forms is typical to speculative fiction, and in these novels it is used to try and make accessible to readers the idea of complex entanglement of individual agents and the environments within which they function. This happens both on the level of the storyworlds (protagonists straddle the borderline between human and digital being, or between

autonomous agent and part of a distributed system), and on the level of the narrative as a construct that asks its readers to entangle themselves in a manner similar to that of the protagonists. Roine and Suoranta also argue that as both protagonists are cognitively unusual, and as both narratives explicitly use fluid gender identifiers, the novels aim to wield the characters and their identities as instruments for making progressive statements about the diversity of human lives, and about the ethics of our various interdependencies. However, as is also shown in the article, in the process of representing complex agencies via the literalisations of narrative conventions, both novels encounter the very limits they attempt to transcend, as the conventions they focus on in fact highlight conventional, individual agency. Thus the novels are finally unable to fully represent the networked, distributed existence that is typical of digital environments.

Finally, we turn more explicitly to the ethical questions first raised by Raipola's article on the teleology of narratives of human development, and by Roine and Suoranta's article in the context of science fiction's representations of environmentality. First, Colin Davis explores three case studies, each of which presents different challenges to the ability and the right of narrative to represent memory. Within the study of narrative ethics, one of the central issues of debate has been the epistemological and ethical limits of trauma narratives. What experiences and events can or should be rendered as narratives? In this article, Davis takes up the further question of forgetting, and asks whether remembering everything should, indeed, be the aim, or whether forgetting should also be embraced as a crucial part of the ethics of telling. With analyses from both fiction and non-fiction texts, and from both written and film narrative, Davis sets out to show how narrative can both represent the value of memory and yet undermine it; both define the limits to what of our past can be narrated and yet exceed those limits. The texts Davis studies are Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Funes the Memorious" (1954, originally published in Spanish in 1942), J.M. Coetzee's partly nonfictional novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and Claude Lanzmann's holocaust documentary *Shoah* (1985). Through the analyses of these works Davis presents different ways in which these narratives negotiate the questions of what can be recounted, and what role forgetting might play in the process.

Our special issue closes with C. Parker Krieg's "Archival Earth," which combines narratology with historical materialist ecocriticism to speak of the way contemporary literature attends to the relationship between narrative and the world. Krieg takes as his starting point the historical and material embeddedness of literature, and asks what follows to the limits of narrative from the fact that the contexts in which it is embedded are themselves

facing their limits – in terms of both the precarity of cultural memory and the ongoing environmental destruction. That is, since our existence as historical beings with both a past and a future is limited by our material embedding, the same limits are being experienced in narrative explorations of our contemporary condition. Krieg studies several narratives that engage in dramatizing or questioning the current environmental conditions that support making and maintaining memory. The examples range from nonfiction texts to speculative fiction, and in all of them Krieg identifies ways of confronting the limits of historical and material precarity with metaleptic moves: deliberate acts of construction that make a connection between text and reality present within the narrative itself. A central strategy in these works is constructing a figure of some element or object that continues to warrant meaning in the midst of catastrophe, and making that object span the border of diegesis and world – for example, material objects that function as memory supports, or either real or imagined archives that would secure information in the face of silence and forgetting. Thus both the historical past and the complex, nonhuman, material reality that are in one sense unnarratable, are in these works used to give the stamp of authenticity to the narrative, making even the most speculative fiction a form of testimony.

Narrative, when understood as a practice that influences how individuals frame and perceive the reality around them, has the potential to change readers' cognitive and embodied practices: their engagement with their environments, with each other, and with works of art such as the narrative itself. If narrative does have this power to influence its audience, different forms of narrative – realist, speculative or indeed scientific narratives – can utilize that power in different ways. Narrative analyses that both acknowledge and query this power may then reveal the techniques and dynamics that narratives use to try and represent the otherwise unrepresentable. And based on such analyses, we can work towards a theoretical frame for how such techniques push against the limits of narrativity, how narratives are used expand our understanding of human beings and our experiential, social, and media environments, and how the various boundaries of narrative theory continue to be redrawn.

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